

The Portability of Roots Analytical Tools for Diasporaphiles

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Individuating diasporas

Three weary Jewish refugees stood before the Paris representative of the Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. "Where are you all going?" he asked them.

"I'm on my way to Rome", said the first.

"London is my destination", said the second.

"My plan is to go to South Africa", said the third.

"South Africa? Why so far?" the agent asked wonderingly. "Far? Far from where?" wistfully countered the refugee. (Ausubel, 1948, p. 25)

An old joke, which will be familiar to many readers. Perhaps this chapter, too, should have been entitled, "Far from Where?" I want to write in that spirit, not so much about pulling up of roots as about putting them down again, about the ways in which, through processes of re-rooting, diaspora is distinguished from exile. Exile uproots people or peoples. They leave home and country. But diaspora begins after displacement, in the countries where exiles go to live. In these new places, not only the exiles themselves, but also their descendants, make new roots for themselves, and thereby establish and build diasporic communities.

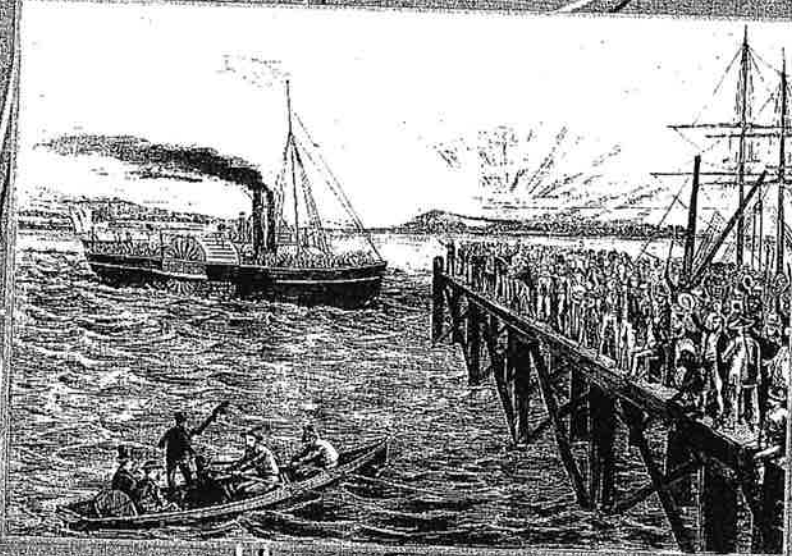
In order to make this shift of focus from uprooting to re-rooting, I adopt a standpoint that categorically rejects two common assumptions about diaspora:

- a) There is something inherently wrong or flawed with the condition known as diaspora, and
- b) whatever good has come out of diaspora constitutes a kind of consolation prize for suffering arising from diaspora.

The standpoint I adopt is not merely that of one who lives in diaspora. Rather, it is a standpoint that appreciates diaspora unabashedly and without qualms: a "diasporaphilic" standpoint.

From a diasporaphilic standpoint, it is worth remarking that persecution is not the inevitable concomitant of exile and dispersion. Indeed, when, as often happens in the telling of Jewish history, persecution becomes the focus of our attention, much of the richness of diasporic life is eclipsed. I am not contesting the fact that dispersed peoples are vulnerable to persecution. But this vulnerability – and this history of persecution – should not prevent us from studying diasporic life in its fullness. One salient example of the tendency to tell Jewish history as a history of persecution is the recurrent mention of the holocaust in discussions of diaspora.

Becoming a diasporaphile is not merely a matter of declaring, "I am a



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diasporaphile". Indeed, it is difficult to sustain a diasporaphilic standpoint, and part of my project is to say why this is so.

There is a strong pull to associate identity with homeland.¹ This pull is toward the assumption that we in diaspora live a lesser life. For unless it embodies a compelling ideology that says that diaspora is inherently flawed, diasporic life decentres identity. I believe that it is possible (though difficult) to embrace such a decentred, diasporaphilic, identity.

Insofar as Jewish diaspora is concerned, the diasporaphilic standpoint is particularly elusive. We Jews typically understand diaspora as if there were just one Jewish Diaspora, as if diaspora were a situation or status, as if "diaspora" were another word for exile and entailed, existentially, homelessness: living without any actual roots.

My intention in writing from this diasporaphilic standpoint is to try to provoke a new appreciation of the complexity and variety of life in diaspora, in part by re-contextualising our empirical understandings of diaspora communities. The chapter has two stages, each of which involves (a) clarifying the distinction between our concepts of exile and of diaspora, and (b) beginning to re-think how these two concepts are related to each other. In the first stage, I ask: What are the conditions for the possibility of individuating diasporas? How do we, and how should we, tell them apart? In the second stage, I ask: how does Judaism perpetuate the conflation of the concepts of diaspora and exile? Whereas in stage one my concern is with a problem of individuation, and hence falls under the rubric of metaphysics, in stage two my concern belongs to theology. Even if our theology makes us Diasporaphobic, it ought to be possible to be a theological Diasporaphobe and a metaphysical diasporaphile. And these positions ought to be open to religious Jews and irreligious Jews alike.

Thus, the first stage of my chapter is about everybody's diasporas, while the second stage is about the Jews in particular. I need the second stage because I cannot simply set aside the ramifications of Judaism's religious interpretations of diaspora. The two stages are connected by an interlude in which I broach the subject of the centrality of landless peoplehood to Jewish religion. Critical reflection on the notion of landless peoplehood helps to make the distinction between diaspora and exile both in universalistic and in particularistic Jewish contexts.

Stage One "diaspora" and "diasporas"

In this stage, I argue for the claim that there are many diasporas, even many Jewish diasporas. A key idea will be that even though diaspora (understood as displaced and/or landless peoplehood) is an abstraction, diasporas are concrete results of the trajectories of displacement of groups of people. Since I want to make sense of the distinction between

¹ It is beyond the scope of this chapter to pursue questions concerning relationships between national identity, community identity, and individual identity either within Jewish life or in the lives of other diasporic peoples.

exile and diaspora, I need carefully to attend to concrete diasporic experiences as well as to the notion of "diaspora" in the abstract. Moreover, diaspora and diasporas also need to be prised away from what I call "big-D Diaspora", with its religious significance.

The term "Diaspora" (big-D) refers to the dispersion of the Jews that began with the destruction of the 2nd Temple in CE70. This usage poses problems, although it is the usage of ordinary Jewish education. The term "diaspora" (little-d) refers to any dispersion, (quoting the American Heritage Dictionary) "as of any originally homogeneous people". "Homogeneous" is a weasel word here: it handles shared nationality, ethnicity, or geographical origin. These two definitions will permit me my next step, which is to acknowledge that this distinction appears to be a distinction without a difference.

Here is a thought-experiment that shows how it might seem this way. Suppose I were to allow that "Diaspora" is a proper name, and that its extension is a singleton set, namely: the set consisting of the one and only one Jewish Diaspora. Under this supposition, my diaspora/diasporas distinction would become trivial and uninteresting. Here's why: if there were exactly one Jewish Diaspora, then in order to study concretely different diasporic communities and take into account the contrasts as well as similarities among them, historians of the Jewish Diaspora would treat each episode of displacement of Jews as a part or an aspect of The Diaspora. (Indeed, this seems to be the way diasporic Jewish experience is presented at the Museum of the Diaspora in Tel Aviv.)

Some might complain of such an approach that it places the whole notion of diaspora too much within the particular realm of Jewish thought and experience. But this complaint would be misplaced, since the term "diaspora" would nonetheless still be available for the African diaspora, the Armenian diaspora, the Tibetan diaspora, the Greek diaspora, etc., all of which would then be called "diaspora" by analogy with The Diaspora.

If this were the whole outcome of my thought experiment, it would be pointless for me to go on insisting on distinguishing between many diasporas within the Jewish experience, since any such distinctions could just as easily be framed as distinctions between aspects or parts of the one big-D Diaspora.

But I do nonetheless insist on my Diaspora/diasporas distinction. Why? I've already hinted at one reason: I think it is a kind of solipsistic mistake to claim the concept to be centrally a Jewish one. But the more interesting reasons will emerge only as I go along. My emphasis will be on the special importance for the Jewish Diaspora of acknowledging that a plethora of points of view can be present in any diasporic community.

How can I precisely enough address the plurality and diversity of diasporic experience? By asking a technical and metaphysical question about the term "diaspora": is "diaspora" a count noun (like "planet") or a mass noun (like "water")? A successful search for criteria of identity and individuation for diasporas (even just for Jewish diasporas) would show that "diaspora" has at least one use as a count noun. In seeking

such criteria, it is sensible to look first at an example or examples. I want neither to report empirical findings nor collect historical material. Instead, I will point to Jewish communities that uncontroversially qualify as diasporic and that exhibit features of diasporic experience. Such communities are diasporic in many ways at once, and also Jewish in many ways at once, although not entirely Jewish for all that.

The handiest example is also the autobiographical one. I have family in Australia. Indeed, I have family on four continents. Any plausible explanation of my family's dispersion must make ineliminable reference to the diaspora out of Hitler's Europe.²

What kind of an example is this? It illustrates – as I am about to show in detail – four things about diasporic communities:

1. each Jewish diaspora gives rise to many Jewish diasporic communities;
2. the typical Jewish diasporic community has people from more than one Jewish diaspora and often some other diasporas as well;
3. Jewish diasporas and the diasporic communities they spawn are not entirely Jewish; and
4. Jewish diasporas are not the same things as Jewish communities: communities and diasporas need to be identified and individuated differently.

Taken together, these four features of diaspora help me to defend the following claim: inasmuch as diaspora is an explanatory concept, "diaspora" is a count noun and provides a metaphysical ground for theorising diaspora as manifold. I want to consider these four features of diaspora's manyness one by one.

1. *Each Jewish diaspora results in many Jewish diasporic communities:* I live in Fresno, a city of about half a million in California's vast agricultural central valley, where Jews have lived among "Anglos" for generations. There are also concentration camp survivors in our community, as well as many others whose families, like my own, fled Hitler's Europe. I am part of the diaspora out of Hitler's Europe, as is my cousin in Melbourne. Fresno's and Melbourne's are but two of the numerous Jewish communities in which the diaspora out of Hitler's Europe has been re-rooting. Indeed, the modern state of Israel itself counts among these communities.
2. *The typical Jewish diasporic community has people from more than one Jewish diaspora and often some other diasporas as well:* The region where I live was part of Mexico until the mid 19th century, and some Latino Californians are Jews. The diaspora out

of Spain at the time of the Inquisition and the diaspora out of Hitler's Europe are but two of the Jewish diasporas that share my Jewish community. Moreover, in addition to the Jewish diasporas, literally dozens of other diasporas are represented in Central California. For example, many south-east Asian refugee communities are in Fresno. Fresno also has one of the world's most important Armenian communities. The region's Japanese-American community includes many families whose already-settled diaspora on the Pacific Coast was disrupted by uprooting and internment at the behest of the US government during the Second World War. The typical ethnic community in this region has within it more than one diaspora: there are Armenians whose exile was a result of the Armenian genocide early in the 20th century, and there are also Armenians who have been exiled since the break-up of the Soviet Union.

3. *Jewish diasporas and the diasporic communities they spawn are not entirely Jewish:* How many diasporas out of Hitler's Europe are there? I generally say just one. But it is easy to see how a larger number might be defended. For example, my family had many members of these communities as neighbours when I was a child in the 1950s in New York. And among them, many had been resettled in America after having been liberated, rescued, held in Displaced Persons camps, etc. They are part of the diaspora of post-war resettlement. This diaspora is marked partly by the involvement of bureaucratic agencies with their red tape, of both the governmental and non-governmental organisations. My parents, however, and many like them, escaped "just in time". This is the diaspora of uprooting. It is marked, often, by the plain way the refugees say "we ran away". Somewhat paradoxically, this phrase tends to occur as a reply to the question, "Are you a survivor of the Holocaust?" "No", my mother will say, "we ran away just in time". And there were many who became exiles relatively early in the 1930s, either for political reasons or because they could not continue their scholarly or scientific work in their countries of origin. Among the most famous examples are the artists who formed an exile community in Los Angeles and contributed so much to the entertainment industry. This was a diaspora of relative privilege. Although I do not consider it a crucial issue, I'm inclined to treat these three waves as part of a single diaspora, mainly because I think it difficult to pinpoint distinct causes of exiles. What is an important issue is this: each of the waves of newcomers, and each of the re-rooting Jewish communities, has had non-Jews within it. In part, of course, this is because Jews were not the only victims of Nazi persecution in Europe. But this is also true because there were some who were not Jews who belonged to extended Jewish families or to groups of people who were connected by their work or other allegiances to Jewish communities in their country of origin. The social science scholarship that deals with this phenomenon is very well developed, and I'm not the relevant expert. My point is simply

² At the conference where this paper was given, I added this remark here: "I have been having second thoughts, since yesterday evening, about the fact that my decision to talk about this particular diaspora creates more of the discourse that lets Auschwitz eclipse everything. But so be it."

that Jewish diasporic communities are not typically homogeneously Jewish communities.

4. *Jewish diasporas are not the same things as Jewish communities: they are individuated and identified differently:* While Jewish communities are individuated according to where they are, Jewish diasporas are individuated according to their cultural-geographic origins. These "places" of origin are not mere locations on the globe, but rather markers for the places and situations that provoked exile – the circumstances of displacement.

So when I say I belong to the diaspora out of Hitler's Europe, and that I have that diaspora in common with some others in North America and Israel and Australia, I'm saying that this diaspora has its origins in two different aspects of Europe, one being the very same Europe in which the escapees from Hitler once lived, the other being the Europe we Jews of mid-century European origin are now *not* living in.

But having this diaspora in common is not the same thing as belonging to the same diasporic community. My own diasporic Jewish community is the American Jewish community, and specifically the Jewish community in Fresno, California where I make my home. I have that diasporic Jewish community in common with many who have found their way to it by many different routes. We have in common the fact that our histories are diasporic, but we have many different histories through different diasporas.

What I have just said applies to diaspora. Now I'll make the connection between diaspora and exile. Exile involves uprooting; the phenomenology of exile includes the experience of our "here" being literally "there", as well as the loss of our "here". But the concrete historical processes of diaspora are processes of re-rooting in communities that eventually become, for many, their own "here." Thus, one could say that in this respect there is not any one place in particular that any given diasporic community is "far" from.

Many diasporic communities result from any one diaspora, and each diasporic community eventually embodies points of view drawn from diverse diasporas. This means that for diaspora to be a useful explanatory concept, it must permit the complexity of this process to be made explicit. In turn, appreciating this process involves recognising that the plurality of diaspora occurs along many dimensions.

Interlude

acknowledging (critically) authentic landless peoplehood

There is a strong diaspora-affirming tradition in Judaism. Religious observance historically fills the gap left by the loss of the Land. This is an accomplishment of Rabbinic Judaism. Indeed, it is uncontroversial that the hegemony of the Rabbinic tradition is tied to the Rabbis' inventions of ways to fill this gap so as to produce authentic, landless peoplehood (Sarason, 1986).

Here I will not explore any of the issues about land and nationality, nor ask about the place of diasporophobia in Zionism. But I would nonetheless like to draw attention to what seems to me to be a false

dichotomy that comes from Rabbinic Judaism's claim to hegemony. This dichotomy requires of us that we either reject diaspora completely or that we embrace it and draw our identity from religious observance (that is, from study and ritual). But surely these are not the only two options available, for there are irreligious as well as religious Jews all around the world, and these Jews, religious and irreligious alike, have many different diasporic histories and consequently roots all over the world as well. Indeed, many Jews do not take their identity either from religious observance or from actual or imagined *aliyah* to the Land of Israel.³

To think my way to a third alternative while holding onto my diasporaphilic standpoint, I need to be willing to doubt the claim that Rabbinic Judaism is normative Judaism. I think I can do this, in part because I am from the generation born in the middle of the 20th century. Doing otherwise would leave only positions left over from the previous century to choose from: irreligious Jews from all over the world don't really exist (maybe the Jewish Enlightenment created some of them, but in the greater scheme of things this phenomenon will turn out to have been of negligible significance), or they are not really irreligious (maybe they support pious Jews or Jews in the holy land as surrogates), or else they are not really Jews (maybe they don't realise or care that their grandchildren are unlikely to be Jewish). These seem to me to be three versions of internalised anti-Semitism, and false to boot.

So how do I imagine a diasporaphilic Jewish life that could equally well be religious or irreligious?⁴ In the second stage of my chapter, I am going to make the attempt. The key will be to recognise the agency of each of the scattered communities in its own re-rooting. I will argue that this requires separating the politics, history, and phenomenology of diasporic life from the theological role of Diaspora.

Stage Two

"Diaspora" and "diaspora"

Living diasporically is not a status or situation but rather a dynamic process: the process I have been calling the process of re-rooting. This process includes much of what fascinates us when we find ourselves riveted by the details of diasporic cultures, and when we marvel at historical examples of the complex and delicate interactions between diasporic communities and their so-called "host" societies. This is not to say that the processes of re-rooting and diasporic living are not particular to Jewish diaspora: different diasporic cultures do their re-rooting in different ways, reflecting their particular cultures and

³ No survey of modern Jewry is complete without mention of secular Jews (e.g. the Bund) or unaffiliated Jews. A typical such survey is in de Lange, 1986, pp 33-34.

⁴ Ruth Linden reminds me that I am not alone in posing this question, and that this it is not a question merely for imagining, since there are communities where such a life is lived, as described, for example, in Myerhoff, 1978.

histories and the geopolitics of their times. On the other hand, living diasporically is central to what Judaism and the Jewish people have been for thousands of years: if I were not squeamish about essences, I would be saying that living diasporically is the essence of Jewishness.⁵

To ask how the Jewish diasporic process is sustained, and who bears responsibility for it, is to pose, in a new, diasporaphilic, way, the question: "What makes a positive Jewish identity?" My answer is that individual diasporic communities are the bearers of the process, and that to recognise this is to recognise their diasporic agency, as opposed to considering only the suffering associated with their exilic status. Moreover, the diasporic agency of any particular community articulates the points of view of all the diasporas that are present in that community.⁶

Almost everything I have written so far concerns little-d diaspora, understood as a stuff, albeit not as a physical object like a table or chair, but rather as a concrete social and historical process. And what I am interested in is the contrast between diaspora in this sense and The (big-D) Diaspora.

Next, a remark about what "Diaspora" names. In my view, it does not name the situation of the Jewish people throughout the last two millennia of their history. I think that 'Diaspora' names a theological thing. It is within a theological framework that Diaspora and exile coalesce, and this theological Diaspora tends to be confused with the process of diaspora, which is not a theological thing but a psychological, historical, political, and existential thing.

Hence, it is our theology that creates the illusion that diaspora manifests itself solely as exile. But Jewish theological traditions are extremely diverse and do not all provide the same, or consistent, accounts of the individual or relative significance or meaning of exile and Diaspora. In fact, as early as the Babylonian exile, the problem of explaining the meaning of exile is a central problem for Jewish theology.⁷ Here I cannot pursue two highly relevant tasks: to look, as Biblical scholars do, at the moralistic framework from *Deuteronomy* that stands at the heart of how exile comes to have for us such theological weight; and to list and discuss at least a few of the theological

⁵ Living diasporically has meant many different things, of course. For A.J. Heschel, for example, "The restoration of Zion began on the day of its destruction. The land was rebuilt in time long before it was restored in space. We have been building it daily for nearly two thousand years." (*Israel: an Echo of Eternity*, 1967, p. 54).

⁶ It is in this connection that I am ready to characterize diasporic community in some of the same terms that have been used by other diasporaphilic writers. I think especially of Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin, who characterize diaspora partly in terms of the ability to turn particularist, self-interested and self-help styles of community formation into eclectic and cosmopolitan multi-perspectival marginality.

⁷ For varieties of meanings of diaspora, see Arnold Eisen, *Galut*, 1986. In *The Religion of the Landless*, Daniel N. Smith provides a fascinating sociological account of how diasporic religious experience get its meanings.

traditions that contain a pattern of theme and variations, where landless peoplehood and their covenant is the theme whose many variations, in one way or another, all take the process and experience of diaspora to be intelligible only as exile.

Such theological discussions would be lengthy and, moreover, beyond my competence. But there is one observation I need to make here: the Deuteronomistic discourse is largely concerned with Land and Landlessness as, respectively, reward and punishment for the people of Israel. Moreover, landlessness as punishment needs a new interpretation in each new situation so as to keep the notion of covenant intelligible and to sustain Jewish peoplehood.⁸ It is therefore small wonder that many Jewish theological traditions are Diasporaphobic. And by the same token the existence of such a rich tradition that embraces the Diaspora is itself something of a miracle.

I am not taking issue with any one theological tradition within Judaism. Rather, I want to consider the possibility that as a theological term, "exile/Diaspora" be understood as a place name in the way "Sinai" is a place name. I do not think it necessary, however, to invent a Diasporaphilic theology. But I do think it worth noticing the ways in which our theological legacy structures the lives of both irreligious and religious Jews.

Summary *the portability of roots*

Some of my friends think that I'm "doing house plants" here: philodendron and wandering Jew, they have in mind. And in a way they are right, but for the wrong reasons. For me, the image is one of nourishment with water, sun, and fertiliser; propagation by grafting, cutting, rooting and re-rooting; and tender care for a delicate root-system.

I believe that I have experienced a significant amount of this cultivation of house plants. Not only do I feel like a house plant that has been cultivated in diaspora, but also I often feel as if my daily life of teaching and learning together with others contributes to the cultivation not only of others but of our institutions, both Jewish and secular. Beyond this, I feel that I have spent my entire life witnessing these processes of cultivation in homes and schools and synagogues and political organisations, etc. This image of the cultivation of house plants expresses quite well what it is like to attend to the real world, including the genuine Jewish world, which we often block from view in (and with) the intensity of our exilic longings. This practice is borrowed from our religious observances via slippage from forever lamenting

⁸ A helpful phenomenological approach is in Jaffe, 1997. Robert Maldonado helped me to understand the connection between Deuteronomism and the traditional problem of evil.

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exile/Diaspora to permanently mourning diaspora. Our re-rooting seems to carry with it a paradoxical commitment never to allow ourselves to be properly re-rooted, as if out of fear of assimilation, which is not nearly so worthy a fear as we make it.

A young, Armenian-American student once said to me, "Why does my Armenian community behave as if survival can only be assured through the Church or by fighting for the land?" This led me to wonder whether perhaps we Jews do the same. These days (feigning optimism?) I say that we do not. What we tend to do instead is to describe ourselves, ideologically, as if these were our only choices. But we do not, in fact, live this way: we live, peacefully and often without strong attachments to the synagogue, in our diasporic communities, re-rooting ourselves, and in the process making significant contributions to those communities. Even for those Jews who are not religious, Jewish diasporaphilia is more difficult to embrace than generic diasporaphilia. This is so because it has been from Jewish religious thought that we have tended to draw our concepts of diaspora. So our actual diasporic lives have been conflated – even for non-believers and for minimally observant Jews: with the concept of landless peoplehood that lies at the heart of Jewish longings for redemption.

Exile followed by dispersion is not the same thing as exile, dispersion, and persecution. And so, we can live without the theory that teaches us that facing persecution or the prospect of persecution is a necessary condition for re-rooting.

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